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# INTERVIEW WITH PROF. NICO NORMAN KOOPMAN



Nico Koopman is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel at Stellenbosch University, and Professor of Systematic Theology, Ethics and Public Theology. He is also an ordained pastor of the Uniting Reformed Church in Ida's Valley, Stellenbosch. He served as pastor in the congregations of Atlantis, Westfleur-Atlantis, and Bellville (as university chaplain and youth minister). He was Vice-Rector of Huguenot College in Wellington, and later Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. He was a founding member and chairperson of the Global Network for Public Theology and is a fellow of the Institute for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey. His research focuses on themes such as inalienable dignity, healing reconciliation, embracing justice, responsible freedom, equality, as well as the reciprocal and transformative impact



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of universities on various spheres of society, including politics, economics, the natural environment, civil society, and public opinion-formation. He is involved in public discourses in the academy, churches and broader society, both locally and internationally.

**ML:** *Conscious of some significant approaches and phrases in the recent flood of excellent theological memoirs (see De Gruchy 2015; Jones 2019), I am specifically curious to hear your response to Will Willimon's (2019) insight that there is "a vocative God who explains my life".*

**NNK:** I believe in the calling, the vocation, of all people. Part of the Reformation legacy of Martin Luther is that he helped us rediscover the priesthood of all believers. This prompted us to rediscover the ministry of all believers. God calls all people. There is a vocation, a calling, for all of us, both inside and beyond the Christian community. We are called to be Christians, so that we can be truly human. I have a calling that is practised in the four mandates of, firstly, house, family, circles of friends; secondly, church; thirdly, work and, fourthly, in broader society with its plurality of public domains (see Koopman 2013). I believe that I have been called to fulfil these four mandates. I fulfil my specific calling as pastor and theologian. As pastor and theologian, I serve God and God's people and creation in the four mandate areas that Bonhoeffer (1978) refers to. As academic theologian, I practise my calling in academy, church and broader society. In academy, I practise together with my colleagues as a researcher, teacher, agent of reciprocal social impact, and a university leader. I serve churches as pastor and church theologian, *i.e.* theologian formed by the worship of the church, and serving the church as it strives to fulfil its prophetic, priestly and royal-servant calling as church of Christ (see Koopman 2014a).

**ML:** *Another recent and very relevant memoir that comes to mind is Nicholas Wolterstorff's (2019) In this world of wonders – Memoir of a life in learning. His approach is along the line of "community", meaning:*

*Mine has been a life in community – in many communities ... I have been shaped by those communities, by movements and developments within them, by their traditions. I have in turn contributed to shaping them. In the telling of my life, I would be telling about those communities, telling about them from the vantage point of my participation (Wolterstorff 2019:xiv).*

*As teacher who was always fond of saying to us in class, "I am because we are" (see Koopman & Vosloo 2002:143), please shed more light on the bodily insight of life in community and in those specific communities that played such a significant role in your development and witness.*

**NNK:** I am being formed and, in future, will continue to be formed in various communities. Families, nuclear and extended families, form me. In family circles, I was brought up with clear direction and consistent support. I was accompanied by role models, moral heroes, who showed the way to go, who walked the talk themselves, and who empowered and enabled me with their example and integrity. Amidst so many struggles and concerns, my parents and family helped me grow up with high levels of assurance and secureness.

The schools and universities that I have attended equipped me with knowledge, values and skills. Unforgettable is the insight of my primary school principal, that a child does not know Geography when she can name all the capital cities of the world, but she discovers for herself, on the road between Lime Acres and Kimberley, that the vegetation of Barkley West differs from that closer to Lime Acres. Unforgettable are the high school years in Kimberley, where we learned to cherish diversity and embrace the other colour, the other religion, the other language, the other culture, the other gender, the other sexual orientation, the one living with disability or with differently abledness. We already had to do science and maths in both Afrikaans and English in Grades 11 and 12 because of a shortage of teachers. We not only learned course contents, but also respect for multilingualism and constructive pragmatism. At the University of the Western Cape, the Free University in Amsterdam, Stellenbosch University and all local and international university partners, we acquired and keep on acquiring the intellectual skills to develop impact-making theories and theory-laden practices for a life of dignity for all, healing of wounds for all, justice for all, freedom for all, and equality for all, especially for the most vulnerable. We learn about science for society and science with society.

**ML:** *David Tracy's distinction in engaging (broadly speaking) three different publics in doing theology is well known, and often referenced in your work (see Koopman 2007). Keeping the critique of Jakub Urbaniak (2016a; 2016b; 2018) in mind whether your work thus far succeeded in doing so (and which I'll ask you specifically about later on in the interview), there seems to be some remarkable effort on your side to embody an engaged scholarship and practise a public theology that deals extensively with all three of the aforementioned publics, namely academy, church and society. Please reflect on the rationale of diversifying so extensively your public theological output, and on what you think you have learned over the years in doing so.*

**NNK:** In my professorial inaugural lecture, I argued that God's love for the world motivates me to engage theologically with all walks of life (Koopman 2009a). The conclusion of the Confession of Belhar 1986 proclaims that Jesus Christ is Lord over all facets of life. During the struggle against apartheid, leaders such as Allan Boesak regularly appealed to Abraham's Kuyper notion that

Jesus Christ, the Lord, writes on every square inch of the universe (Koopman 2014c). From my childhood days, I grew up with the living faith that there is not a domain of life from which God can and should be excluded. Stanley Hauerwas' (1993:750) typical provocative formulations, also with regard to this matter, resonate with me, namely

that any religion that does not tell you what to do with your pots and pans and genitals cannot be interesting.

It is part of my inherited, confessed, proclaimed and practised faith that Jesus Christ is Lord over every square inch of the universe, and that faithful theology should function with that presupposition.

**ML:** *We are currently in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and I am curious to hear your reflections on the church's role thus far in South Africa during the crisis. In light of this crisis, what is there that we should appreciate and celebrate with regard to the church's witness thus far? Is there anything in particular that you miss and would like to envision differently for the church's public witness in contemporary South African society? In sum, looking through the prism of the current COVID-19 crisis, what is the state of the church's public theological witness in South Africa we might long for to come through this crisis?*

**NNK:** The public presence of the church can be described in threefold manner. Based on the threefold office of Christ, the presence of the church can be described as a prophetic, priestly and royal-servant presence (Koopman 2014a). As ones united to Christ through grace and faith, churches live prophetically, priestly and royal-servantly.

The church speaks prophetically in at least five modes, namely envisioning of a new church and society of dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality; criticising where this vision is betrayed by church and society; telling of stories of despair and disappointment, as well as stories of hope and victory; technical and scientific analysis of complex concerns and challenges, and participation in public policy-formation processes. Churches in South Africa invest increasing energy in equipping themselves through the inputs of experts in various walks of life, in order to practise these modes of prophetic engagement. Prophetic speaking is more than envisioning and criticism. It includes at least the three other modes of storytelling, technical analysis and appropriate participation in policy-making and policy-implementation.

Churches are also present in various walks of life in a priestly manner. This priestly work includes pastoral care, diaconate, mediation work, work of healing and reconciliation, and peace-building. This priestly work also entails addressing persistent alienation and enmity amongst people of, among

others, different colour, socio-economic position, gender, sexual orientation, age category and level of ability – and also alienation between humans and nature.

The royal-servant public presence of the church refers to the role of the church in embodying and nurturing faithful discipleship, responsible citizenship, and leadership. Building ethical citizenship and leadership in a world of corruption is such a crucial mandate. In a world of false hope and hopelessness, the royal-servant role of the church implies nurturing realistic hope that rests in the reality of the crucified and risen Christ; resilient, elastic hope that means we can be stretched but not broken; responsive hope that means our vision of a new future makes us say “yes” to responsible involvement in the present.

In COVID time, new concerns surface and old concerns are intensified. In this time, this threefold task of the church should be intensified in an innovative and fresh manner. There are encouraging signs of how churches respond faithfully to this calling. When we assess the role of the church, we should take two factors into account. Our best human efforts are at best ambivalent. Together with strides forward we also neglect and grow wrong. And yes, in light of this ambivalence, churches should consistently practise self-criticism and commit to more faithful forms of living. Secondly, we must not err by reducing the public role of the church to prophetic speaking in the mode of envisioning and criticising. My sense is often that criticism of the church forgets about the ambivalent nature of our best efforts, and it ignores or is not aware of the broader threefold presence of the church in public life, a presence that does not always make news.

**ML:** *One of your other fond sayings I remember as a student in your classes is “deur broosheid het Jesus die boosheid oorwin” [through vulnerability Jesus conquered evil] (see Koopman 2008). To my mind, this is in stark contrast to what we currently see among some global leaders. There seems to be an ever-growing “nasty nativism” in various areas in the world and, in many instances, the state of global politics and leadership are intensifying this problem. It is as if walls and borders, fear and polarisation, populism and opportunism overwhelm the current description of our reality. What kind of theological response do we need to the seeming vacuum in global leadership? As a theologian, how do you envision the approach and agenda to address this challenge? In short, what is your public-intellectual theological take on how to imagine (verbeel-en-verbeeld) such vulnerability that may conquer the current evil leaders we are confronted with?*

**NNK:** In our churches and societies, notions such as independence, autonomy, strength, rationality without emotion, insulation to hurt, and suffering are

portrayed as features of a well-functioning, mature and successful human being and leader. Theology is challenged to contribute to our freedom from this flight from vulnerability. A fresh appreciation of a theology, ecclesiology and anthropology of vulnerability paves the way for acknowledging our dependence upon God, and upon each other to achieve victory. We are freed from arrogance and pride which we see in subtle and crude forms, among others in the ranks of some local and international leaders that you refer to. Furthermore, this rediscovery and re-appreciation of vulnerability advances higher levels of solidarity with the most vulnerable in society. The credibility of our justice and human rights quests is dependent on what difference they make to the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalised in society.

I also think leaders go astray worldwide because of the growth of populism all over the world. We need to advance an ethic of intellectuality that addresses the culture of anti-intellectuality and oversimplification that nurtures populism. We also need to advance an ethic of human dignity in the context of the integrity of creation, which entails that the quality of leadership is determined by whether it advances dignity for all. A fresh emphasis on vulnerability, a renewed appreciation of loving God with all our minds, and a renewed commitment to dignity will help us overcome that type of leadership, and may I say that type of citizenship and discipleship that opts for populism and, therefore, discriminates against stereotypes, stigmatises, demonises and annihilates the other (Koopman 2019c).

**ML:** *Recently, I encountered the following in Jamie Smith's third and last volume of his Cultural Liturgies Project – Awaiting the King – Reforming Public Theology (2017) – where he says the following:*

*While this sort of theoretical, architectonic concern about principles and procedures is surely right, it is inadequate insofar as the challenge of 'forging common life in the midst of directional diversity' requires not only theoretical scaffolding but also dispositions and habits – yea, virtues – of citizens who live and act in common within society. A healthy, pluralistic society requires more than simply policing sphere boundaries and getting law and policy right ... it also requires attention to the formation of agents and actors within those parameters who inhabit both the specific sphere of the state and the other social structures that make up civil society. ... In short, any account of 'good' citizenship in a pluralistic society needs to be rooted in a sufficiently holistic anthropology that is attentive not only to the systems of a just-yet-diverse society but also to the formation of citizens with the requisite habits and virtues. Unsurprisingly, this virtue focus has been largely absent from Reformed accounts of pluralism and politics, symptomatic of wider trends (Smith 2017: 144-145).*

*There are numerous articles and books you have written over the past decades that come to my mind when I heard Smith in this regard. Please respond briefly how you think your work has emerged and developed over the years in addressing this particular concern of Smith on Christian worship being key in the formation of Christians for public theological witness in liberal democratic societies.*

**NNK:** I appreciate Smith's emphasis on civic and public virtues in our quest to build the common good in pluralistic societies. Human rights is not enough. We also need to talk about right humans. My doctoral studies and postdoctoral work emphasised that we need both rights and virtue language. Doctoral students, whom I either supervised or co-supervised, have focused on these themes. The role of worship is indispensable for moral formation and the nurturing of virtue and character. All forms of the church play a crucial role in moral formation, *i.e.* the church as worship services, the congregation with all its practices, the denomination, the ecumenical church that included partnership with other religious and secular traditions, and lastly the church as individuals in volunteer service and individuals in their normal daily roles.

Specifically worship services inform and transform, illuminate and inspire, strengthen and delight worshippers. Christian worship affects subversion of existing wrong persons and structures and brings into being persons and structures that embody what is wise, right, good and beautiful (Koopman 2014b). In various works I drink extensively from the formulation and logic that finds its origins in the work of the disciple of Saint Augustine, Prosper of Aquitaine (390-455 ACE). This logic entails that the *lex orandi* (rule of worship), the *lex credendi* (rule of faith) and the *lex vivendi* (rule of life), and we can add, the *lex convivendi* (rule of life together) are interdependent and interwoven, and impact upon each other.

**ML:** *I thoroughly enjoyed reading through your "William Hurd Scheide Lecture on Religion and Global Concerns: Mandela's Dream – Democracy in South Africa 25 years on" that you gave in Princeton in December 2019 (see Koopman 2019a). It has a beautiful structure and coherent flow in its argumentation; it is particularly rooted in the South African context, yet speaks to a global context, and it is also well acquainted with the most recent resources of the South African situation, by which you give us a further glimpse into how you discern the global kairos we are confronted with. Yet, I was wondering about the following in the end: Should we really as theologians push and reflect upon "Mandela's Dream"? I know that you are aware that it is a contested idea (as you also addressed it in the lecture), thus my concern and question goes beyond that. Aren't there other theological images and vocabulary to recall and resonate when we are truly concerned about "democracy in South Africa 25 years on"? The theological reality is not absent in your witness, but is it in*

*light of the title and actual focus of your paper, actually taking centre stage in your thought? In sum, we are interested to hear from you what counts as a theological focus and language when we speak as public theologians on “Religion and global concerns”?*

**NNK:** This is a very important question. Theologians must guard against various dangers when we go public. We should not function as political scientists with a religious interest. Neither should we be co-opted by the agenda of the dominant political dispensation of the day, even by democracy with its noble vision and its legitimate claim to be an imperfect political model, but in all probability the best that human history could bring to the fore to date. Fear for being co-opted should, on the other hand, not lead to withdrawal of theologians from public life; that fear should not lead to self-secularisation and sociological sectarianism. Theologians speak about God in the world. That is the heart of our task. The title of my professorial inaugural lecture, to which I referred earlier, reflects on God’s love for the world, God’s choice for the world, God’s commitment to the world, as point of departure and framework and end of my theological labour. In appropriate mode and language, we should undertake this task. And we should ask what is theological about every contribution that we make. I have also learned over the years that you do not always have to use theological language explicitly in order to speak theologically. This is especially the case in my role as an executive university administrator in a pluralistic institution.

**ML:** *Harold Breitenberg’s well-known article, with the telling title of “Will the real public theology please stand up!” (2003), seems to be of extreme relevance in South Africa, where this question continues to flare up in our midst from time to time. There are various critical contributions that come to mind in this regard. For instance, Tinyiko Maluleke’s 2011 response to Will Storrar where he spoke of “the elusive public of public theology”; Steve de Gruchy in discussion with his father, John de Gruchy (2014:43), with the former preferring “social theology” instead of “public theology”; Gerald West (2016:542) who still prefers to speak of “people’s theology” instead of public theology in post-liberation South Africa; Dirkie Smit (2017:68), who notes that some of the most significant and influential “public” theologians in South Africa today do not want to embrace, be named, or known by this title; Allan Boesak (2019:130), again reiterating in a most recent publication that “I do not consider myself a ‘public theologian’”, because as a “liberation theologian” he has some concerns about public theology’s apparent public, or, in the words of Jakub Urbaniak (2018:334) who critiques public theology in South Africa for “its elitist and populist inclinations”. On the other hand, there are numerous public theologians such as Heinrich Bedford-Strohm (2018) and yourself (Koopman 2009a:423; 2019b:97), who consistently argue*

*that public theology is liberation theology for a liberal democracy. In short, how should we make sense of this apparent lack of consensus and conflict among “public theologians” who all care deeply about the state and future of South Africa today?*

**NNK:** The diversity of approaches among theologians who engage with public life, and among theologians who use the notion of public theology is not an embarrassment, but an opportunity. I drink from all the theologians you mention in your questions. And I view it as very positive that we have such diversity, differences, even conflicting views, and lively debates. It simply enriches theological discourse, and helps us remain open to each other, to practise self-criticism and to never reach (premature) contentment, to keep on discussing, to keep on learning from each other, and to thereby grow closer to practising a faithful theology that appropriately serves a society that needs good theology so very much.

**ML:** *The critique against public theology the past couple of years in the South African context is most thoroughly developed by Urbaniak (2016a; 2016b; 2018), and specifically projected towards your work, in particular. The critique is quite extensive, and space permits me to go into all of the different points and detail. Thus, I quote only one of numerous different paragraphs in the various publications:*

*Koopman’s public theology, and in particular his theology of justice and reconciliation, has something to do with Africa and Africans. In essence, however, Koopman’s theologizing is global, indeed, cosmopolitan in character, deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition, with merely an African veneer. As a consequence, it does not engage constructively with African (especially black African) contexts of our day and thus also fails ‘to provide a serious challenge to the economic and political realm’ in democratic South Africa (Urbaniak 2018:337).*

*How would you respond to Urbaniak’s critique he raised against your work?*

**NNK:** I appreciate Urbaniak’s engagement with my work, albeit with a very limited selection thereof. I, nevertheless, take his various points of criticism seriously. They might expose blind spots in my work. They might reveal priorities that I do not attend to. The specific matter that you refer to, namely the transformative impact of my work on political and economic structures, prompts me, for instance, to enquire whether a more prophet-critical emphasis is perhaps not required in my labour, especially in a context where there is so much evidence of betrayal of the democratic vision of dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality for all, especially for the most vulnerable (Koopman 2019b).

**ML:** *Is it possible and perhaps a case of that we understand prophetic theology in South Africa in very different ways?*<sup>1</sup> *Though Reformed theology is not insensitive to the legacy and tradition of the Kairos Document in South Africa and its continued and ever significant relevance within our society, the Reformed take on prophetic theology differs significantly. If one compares the work of yourself (Koopman 2004; 2005:131-133; 2009b; 2019b), Piet Naudé (2016:123-148), Willie Jonker (2008), Etienne de Villiers (2009; 2010), and Robert Vosloo (2019) over against voices who associate more closely to the trajectory of Kairos and Black Liberation Theology (cf. Le Bruyns 2012; 2015; Vellem 2010; De Gruchy 2016; Urbaniak 2017; Fortein 2019; Boesak 2015), then it seems to me that we differ (even within the ranks of the Reformed tradition in South Africa) on how we envision prophetic theology's embodiment within the liberal democratic context of South Africa today. For instance, reading through Frans Cronje's most recent work, The rise or fall of South Africa (2020), one could easily see how the different takes on prophetic theology in South Africa today could be present in all four different scenarios he portrays for the next decade to come. What do you make of such a reading, and how would you respond to this?*

**NNK:** The “over against” in your question causes some discomfort for me. I do not see myself “over against” the names you mention. Let me take Allan Boesak, for instance. He is very strongly functioning in the tradition of the Confession of Belhar 1986. I learned so much of my theology from him. With him and people like De Gruchy and Fortein, I drink from the wells of liberation theology, black liberation theology, and Belhar. An area of difference might be that we emphasise different facets of the various modes of prophetic theology that I have developed. I think Boesak might be more explicitly critical than I am – something that constructively challenges me, especially in a local and global context where the vision of democracy remains unfulfilled for so many. A more critical orientation is indeed called for. Frans Cronje sketches scenarios such as a national democratic revolution or a liberal democracy that enjoys embodiment, and a hopeful manner of dealing with our historic wounds (chosen vision) or a pessimistic manner of dealing with it (chosen trauma). I believe a public theology that is prophetic in the inclusive sense I try

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1 To complicate the matter even further, one needs to state that it matters in which context we refer to “prophetic theology”. The context, in which this question is raised, is within the current discourse on public theology referred to in the previous two questions. Besides this context, there is also another important reference to “prophetic theology” in South Africa, namely the way it continues to manifest in Neo-Pentecostal churches, and often also for controversial reasons in the media. There has also been some important academic reflection upon this, as this is a significant matter with regard to theology's public witness in contemporary South Africa (see Forster 2019; Ramantswana 2019).

to portray, and priestly and royal-servantly can lead us to scenarios where the democratic dream is materialised.

**ML:** *In closing, drawing from your years of experience, how do you see the future of theological scholarship in South Africa evolving in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How do you envision the agenda in the years to come, and what should we expect from (specific) theologians in particular in this regard? How do you see your own role and contribution in this regard?*

**NNK:** I look forward to journeying with colleagues and institutions to nurture theologies that acknowledge that to honour God is to seek the peace, wholeness and well-being of God's people and creation, as the angels of Luke 2 proclaim.

We need theologies that equip God's people to go forward together. This should be a forward that engages with the past, the present and the future. This should be a together amidst diversity and plurality, and a together despite past, present and future divisions and enmities. The potential of a theology and ethic of hybridity might be a specific focus, hybridity that means that people from a diversity of backgrounds mingle (not mix), commune and engage with each other, enrich each other and develop maximalist, self-transcending identities that acknowledge the particularity of a person, but also the "more" of that person due to the hybrid living with the other.

We need theologies that oppose anti-intellectualism and the oversimplification of complex concerns.

We need critical-constructive theologies that employ Christological restitution as the yardstick for dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality.

We need pragmatic theologies that revalue old practices such as rhetoric, polemics and apologetics. Theologies that are not well versed in these disciplines will struggle in an even increasingly pluralist world, where we are increasingly challenged to give in and outside faith communities intellectually accessible account of the hope that lives in us.

In COVID and post-COVID time, we need theologies of vulnerability that address the ever-increasing flight from vulnerability and the growing lack of Christian realism about vulnerable existence. And amidst vulnerability, fragility, susceptibility to suffering and actual suffering and brokenness, we need Immanuel theologies, God is by our side, God is with us underway, God is for us, God is in us theologies.

We need theologies that, in an appropriate manner, seek the adjustment of the world to the Gospel, and not the other way around.

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